

**Joanna Wharton, *Material Enlightenment: Women Writers and the Science of Mind, 1770-1830*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2018. Pp. 276. £60. ISBN 9781783272952.**

*Material Enlightenment* is part of a new Boydell & Brewer series, Studies in the Eighteenth Century, published in association with the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. It sets a very high bar for the series as a whole.

The volume's interest is in the influence of Lockean philosophy of mind (largely as transmitted through Hartleyan associationism) on the educational and philosophical practice of five leading eighteenth-century women educators: Anna Letitia Barbauld, Honora Edgeworth and her better-known stepdaughter Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More and Elizabeth Hamilton. These women had a spectrum of political allegiances, and each negotiated in different ways the Jacobin taint of materialist philosophy, perceived by conservative critics as a by-word for Gallic atheism. Against them, Wharton sets up Mary Hays as a wholeheartedly radical foil, whose enthusiasm for materialism could be expressed without self-censorship. Wharton sees Hays as typical in her interest in materialism, if not in her unflinching openness in discussing it. In this 'period of remarkably politicised human consciousness and its relation to the material world,' Wharton argues, 'women writers engaged closely and enthusiastically with the "science of man", taking significant risks in the act of publication alone' (7). By suggesting the possibilities for shaping the developing mind through education, however, associationism clearly offered a potential avenue for women to exert influence through their focus on the rising generation, either within their own families or beyond, through public contributions that would become the foundations of the nascent discipline of child psychology.

Wharton painstakingly creates a complex picture of women engaging both with materialist philosophy and with one another as they work to revolutionise children's education. Barbauld is a key figure here. Her series *Lessons for Children* and *Hymns in Prose* were designed to appeal to even very young children's sensory experience of their world and offered a powerful model for many contemporaries. Barbauld's books encode an idealised form of intimate pedagogy, one that Wharton's archival research into the Edgeworth papers show was put into practice by at least one important (and very large) family. After Honora Edgeworth's early death – and the contestation of her legacy by partial survivors – her major contribution to her family's influential work on education was largely overlooked. An example of meticulous archival detective work, Wharton's reconstruction of Honora Edgeworth's observation-led educational practice is a brilliant recovery of the 'material traces' of her efforts which demonstrates their importance to the later theories of her husband and step-daughter.

In her examination of the work of Hannah More and Elizabeth Hamilton, Wharton takes on two of the period's more conservative commentators on education. More and Hamilton attempted to appropriate Locke for conservative ends and dissociate his educational ideas from their republican connotations. More's evangelical efforts are well known, but Wharton sheds new light on them by explaining both their tacit Lockean theoretical basis, and More's practical struggles to prosecute her educational agenda. More's evangelical ambitions for Somerset's working class have long been seen as problematic: Wharton shows how mistrust of More's aims and methods were there from the beginning.

The discussion of the work of Elizabeth Hamilton and Maria Edgeworth underscores the interconnectedness of the work of all five women (and some men, such as Richard Lovell Edgeworth) in their efforts towards the 'pre-history' of child psychology. It is here that the inescapably feminist potential of this field is made fully apparent. Hamilton, like More, was conservatively opposed to a Wollstonecraftian liberational proto-feminism and does not challenge her society's gender norms overtly. It is clear, however, that the gendered division of labour which made – and typically continues to make – the work of educating very young

children women's work, gave women an outstanding advantage in developing and theorising what we would now think of as developmental psychology.

This highly informative book reflects its acknowledged origins as a PhD thesis in the best conceivable way: Wharton offers an innovative, persuasive and intellectually well-grounded argument that unfolds over five richly-evidenced chapters, bringing to bear wide-ranging reading from often neglected primary texts and a wealth of exciting material drawn from careful archival investigation.

Wharton stops short of claiming the status of originators of the discipline of psychology for her subjects, which – given what she presents of their work in various proto-psychological fields – seems overcautious. The evidence adduced by *Material Enlightenment* suggests, to the contrary, that the women who are the focus of Wharton's study ought to be credited with the first careful observations of infant learning that we would now think of as fundamental to developmental psychology, and some of the earliest experimentation and evidence-backed theorising in the field.

*Olivia Murphy*  
*University of Sydney*